
Anthony Chaney, *Runaway. Gregory Bateson, the double bind, and the rise of ecological consciousness*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017, pp. 304

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What Anthony Chaney wants to provide us with this book could be considered a reply to the frequent call made by authors such as Donna Haraway: “What must be cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?” (Haraway 2016: 2). When Chaney states that “we require stories” (17), the reader might find this requirement in correlation with what Haraway suggests we require: “learning to be truly present [...] as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (1). Does Gregory Bateson’s works help us “staying with the trouble”?

Chaney reminds us that Gregory Bateson came from a family that was firmly established in the intellectual environment of his country. His grandfather, John Bateson, was the headmaster at St. John’s College, Cambridge. The research assistant of his father, William Bateson, was Nora Barlow, the granddaughter of Charles Darwin and wife of the queen’s physician (127). Since the beginning, when he studied biology in Cambridge, Gregory Bateson dedicated his works to building a theory of communication. Later on, thanks to his fieldwork among Iatmul people of New Guinea – where Bateson, Margaret Mead and her then husband Reo Fortune “were analysing each other as much as or more than they were the tribal people who surrounded them” (32) –, he began to ask himself what protected a collective from splintering or exploding. Where do diffusing patterns (such as Iatmul naven ritual) come from? Already unsatisfied with functional explanations, Bateson “could find no cause for group equilibrium other than coincidence. [...] It was an uneasy question to leave hanging: why should an entity not explode?” (27-28).

Despite the recognition received for his anthropological studies, Bateson did not decrease his attention towards animals. After observing with attention octopuses monkeys and otters (111) with his new family – “doing natural history was always a family affair” (103) –, he finally left for Hawaii to

research on dolphins in an immense 300,000-gallon tank, and “oceanarium” called Bateson’s Bay at the Oceanic Institute in Hawaii. The problem of play-fighting is illustrative of Bateson’s life-long concerns: how does an animal convey to another one that its bite is only a play bite and not a real bite? How do they communicate such a paradox, in which a statement contradicts the meta-statement that frames its meaning? (112). His hypothesis that mammals asked (riddle of the Sphinx) questions to each other continually and unconsciously, and that their answers contained information (most important to them) about their relationships (111) emphasizes those recent proposals (mostly inspired to the theories of the biologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll and the philosopher Charles Pierce) interested in nonhumans among the so-called ontological turn (cf. Kohn 2013).

Also in a similar vein to some of the authors associated to the ontological turn, Bateson arrived to certain deep concerns about the future of the planet. At the congress on the Dialectics of Liberation, which took place in London at the end of the Sixties (247), he gave his audience — among which was an impressed Allen Ginsberg —, according to Chaney, “a new accounting of reality” that suggested greater responsibility and emphasized dependence (3): “Bateson explained the greenhouse effect and the potential consequences of a rise in global temperature” (234). Building on his conceptualization of the “double bind” — the inescapable paradox in which a message was refuted by its context (“Don’t be so obedient!”) (5) —, he viewed his world as a system in runaway, out of balance and accelerating toward breakdown. Again, this proposal could remind the contemporary reader that “There is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference” (6). To Chaney, Bateson’s participation at the congress represented a shift in thinking about humankind and the environment that is actually the underrecognized legacy of the 1960s and the foremost intellectual experience of our time (3).

Whichever the contribution of Bateson to this legacy might be, it certainly was one emerging from a life troubled

elder brother was killed by a bombshell a month before the armistice of WWI, during WWII Gregory Bateson worked with the Office of Strategic Services created by William “Wild Bill” Donovan, also founder of the Central Intelligence Agency (8), producing and deploying what was then called “black propaganda”: information intended to subvert enemy intelligence and morale (40). Not much is added in the book about how Bateson saw this period of his work. Writing from what is now Sri Lanka and was then the British colony of Ceylon, he asks to a friend of his: “Do you like to be used as an energy source? And do you like, at all, the product achieved by combustion of little pieces of your image?” (41). Chaney also recalls Bateson’s respect toward and relation with Konrad Lorenz (156, 200), which corresponds to the former’s late interest in dolphins’ forms of communication. Building on and feeding the “mainstream fascination with dolphins,” *Life* magazine once published a photo of Bateson using a submerged giant ear in order to hear them and added that one of his colleagues was working “at the behest of the navy” implying that “dolphins might become sophisticated new weapons in the Cold War” (105).

Beyond the vicissitudes of war, what might be more astonishing is that such brilliant outcomes as those of Bateson’s work were produced in an environment persistently haunted by precarity. Such situation sometimes seems provoked by himself and his desire to explore a different field of knowledge. During his works with mental illness issues (between his work as anthropologist and ethologist), Bateson turned down two job offers from American psychiatric institutions involving the continuation of his clinical work. His stay at the Oceanic Institute in Hawaii illustrates well how his previous affiliations usually represented a kind of temporary refuge for him and his researches: “He was given the title of associate director, along with a number of administrative duties, but as usual, the position was funded largely by a grant Bateson had himself obtained, and his research objectives were his own. When that funding dried up, in just over a year, Bateson was again at loose ends” (110). At the end of his career, “the 1970s was a challenging time [...] in regard to both his

finances and his health [...] diagnosed with lung cancer [...] his research life was over and thus his access to grants [...] never having institutionalized himself, Bateson faced periods of «singing for his supper»” (252).

Despite its very valuable sources (i.e., Bateson’s personal letters) that illuminate the context of his intellectual work, this book does not develop very much the legacy it points out. What are the concrete contributions of this legacy to the contemporary issues currently raised around a so-called Anthropocene in which “life-enhancing entanglements disappear from our landscapes” affecting “multispecies livability” (Tsing et al. 2017: G4-G5)? Which could be the precise components of Bateson’s contribution to the current debates on the agency of non-humans that seek to avoid both naturalist reductionisms and semiologist idealisms? And finally, how does Bateson’s apparent distance from issues of power and inequality should be considered if we aim to “provide resonance to those other worlds that interrupt the one-world story” producing “non-existence points at the non-existence worlds” (Escobar 2016: 15-22)?

References

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